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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000305

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SUBJECT: FM MUALLEM ADVISOR VIEWS TURKISH CHANNEL AS "BABY  
STEP" AWAY FROM IRAN

REF: A. ANKARA 798

[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 271

[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 263

Classified By: CDA Michael Corbin, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1  
.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Samir al-Taqi, Orient Center Director and informal advisor to FM Muallem, told us April 30 that his mid-April trip to Ankara had helped to pave the way for a positive April 26 exchange between Turkish PM Erdogan and President Asad in Damascus on continuing indirect discussions between Syria and Israel on the Golan. Al-Taqi said the President's public announcement of Syrian participation in the talks provided a strong indication of Syria's desire to see the process advance. According to Al-Taqi, Syrian-Iranian relations remain strong, but Bashar's embrace of the Turkish channel represents a recognition of diverging Syrian and Iranian interests and signals a victory for regime moderates like FM Muallem. While this assessment represents a very generous reading of recent events, Turkey's influence over Syria promises to raise the profile of more pragmatic regime figures. End Summary

[1](#)2. (C) Al-Taqi, who had just issued a public denial to Israeli press reports outing him as the Syrian representative in the three-way talks, said Bashar's public acknowledgment of Syria's participation in the discussions at the Baath Party Central Committee meeting the previous week had come in response to a request by Erdogan. Bashar's public remarks, assessed al-Taqi, represented more than a commitment to pursuing a diplomatic track with Israel; the Syrian President's stance reflected his desire to take a "baby step" away from Iran.

[1](#)3. (C) In al-Taqi's view, Bashar believed Syrian-Iranian ties were strategically important and would continue to remain so. At the same time, the Turks had convinced Bashar that Syria's isolation could not be overcome without pursuing peace with Israel. Bashar, argued al-Taqi, recognized Iran's desire to prevent any peace track -- Golan and Palestinian -- from moving forward. But Bashar had come around to the view that Syria's interest in regaining the Golan could now be realized with the help of Turkey, and perhaps eventually, the United States. Syria had no illusions that the process would progress rapidly. The SARG was also mindful that other events, such as an attack by Hizballah or sustained violence in Gaza, could kill the talks at this early stage. According to al-Taqi, the SARG was nonetheless determined to participate in the Turkish-brokered process as long as it

remained tenable.

¶4. (C) Al-Taqi said he had few details to divulge on Erdogan's April 26 one-on-one session with Bashar, except to say that Erdogan urged Syria to cooperate with the international community in responding to U.S. revelations of Syrian-N. Korean nuclear cooperation. Bashar adamantly denied any nuclear cooperation with N. Korea but listened closely to Erdogan's counsel of exercising restraint over Hizballah and Hamas. As evidence, al-Taqi pointed to FM Muallem's April 28 meeting with Hamas leader Khaled Meshal. The meeting's objective, he continued, was to "contain Meshal" after Israeli military operations in Gaza the previous day. Muallem reinforced Syria's continuing support of Hamas, al-Taqi added, but the "message of restraint was clear." Muallem was not the usual SARG interlocutor for meeting Meshal, and Muallem used the opportunity to urge Hamas support for ongoing negotiations of a "tahdiya" (calming), he said.

¶5. (C) Returning to the nuclear issue, al-Taqi opined that the U.S. revelations had actually had a positive influence on pushing Bashar to embrace the Golan track. Al-Taqi was "65 percent pessimistic" against the likelihood that Lebanon would see a president elected on May 13, but he did believe the SARG was trying not to appear as the major obstacle. Turning to the U.S. view of the Turkish channel and negotiations on the Golan, al-Taqi commented that Syria probably could get by without any near-term declaration of U.S. support for the process, so long as the U.S. were willing to let the talks lead where they may. Al-Taqi added that Syria believed its pursuit of the Turkish channel would eventually help to improve relations with the West. Israeli PM Olmert was likely to raise the subject with President Bush

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in mid-May, he added.

¶6. (C) Comment: Al-Taqi's involvement in Syria's engagement of Turkey lends some credence to suggestions that FM Muallem's standing within the SARG has rebounded after orchestrating what many Damascenes saw as the SARG's solid performance at the Arab League Summit. While the hard-liners who discredited Muallem's efforts to win Syrian support for the Annapolis process still hold significant influence, Bashar has now publicly acknowledged the government's engagement in indirect discussions with Israel. Turkey's sway over Syria has not yet carried over to Lebanon, but our Turkish Embassy contacts are suggesting that putting distance between Syria and Iran may yet have positive influence in this area as well. Although this assessment undoubtedly represents a very generous reading of recent developments, Turkey's involvement promises to raise the profile of more pragmatic Syrian regime figures.

CORBIN